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PRACTITIONER REPORT:

## **The burning circle: (pre)history, performance and public engagement**

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*In recent years, there has been a change of culture in the academic environment: researchers are now strongly encouraged to collaborate across disciplines and develop strategies to engage non-specialist publics with the processes and results of their work. Often, artistic researchers are brought in to provide the ‘window dressing’ that allows other research disciplines to more effectively communicate their ‘hard data’. However, in Burning the Circle, a project that emerged from a collaboration between researchers in Archaeology, History, Music and Theatre Studies, and industry partners Northlight Heritage and National Trust for Scotland, emphasis was given to how artistic activities, in this case performance, produce formally specific insights through their particular mediality and the modes of sensorial engagement they produce. In this article, we approach the event from our perspective as artist-scholars in performance-based disciplines to begin to consider how performance might play a more central and productive role in interdisciplinary public engagement events.*

*Keywords: historically informed performance (HIP), postdramatic theatre, heritage, ephemerality, public engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration.*

In a climate where there is an increasing demand on researchers to develop strategies for engaging non-specialist publics with the processes and results of their work, it is important that we share and reflect upon our methods for doing so. This article sets out to document and discuss a public engagement event<sup>1</sup>, *Burning the Circle* (BtC), that emerged from a collaboration between researchers in Archaeology (Kenneth Brophy), History (Hannah Baxter), Music (Brianna Robertson-Kirkland) and Theatre Studies (Cara Berger) at the University of Glasgow, and industry partners Northlight Heritage (Gavin MacGregor) and National Trust for Scotland (Corinna Goeckeritz)<sup>2</sup>. We approach the event from our perspective as artist-scholars in performance-based disciplines, meaning that we are primarily concerned with the ways of understanding and modes of knowledge-making particular to our medium.

In drawing attention to this, we hope to avoid the tendency, identified by Deirdre Heddon, for the skills of artistic researchers to be used ‘as a tool to engage, communicate, mediate, translate and / or enhance’ the research of other disciplines without creating new approaches to their own research area (2016, p.82). By emphasising what performance might specifically and uniquely disclose about our ways of understanding the past, and how it intersects with the concerns of our collaborators, we want to start thinking about how artistic research can become an equal partner in interdisciplinary public engagement events. This may be of particular importance to artistic researchers in universities in the United Kingdom contending with the ‘Knowledge Exchange and Impact Turn’ (Heddon, 2016, p.79), but we also hope that our findings are of interest to scholars beyond this particular context. Across our reflections, we acknowledge the variety of performative methods we employed and how they develop from our individual research which is both methodologically and thematically distinct: Robertson-Kirkland examines

historical vocal education and how to utilise these methods when singing historical works, while Berger melds practical research and critical theory to investigate contemporary, postdramatic theatre forms.

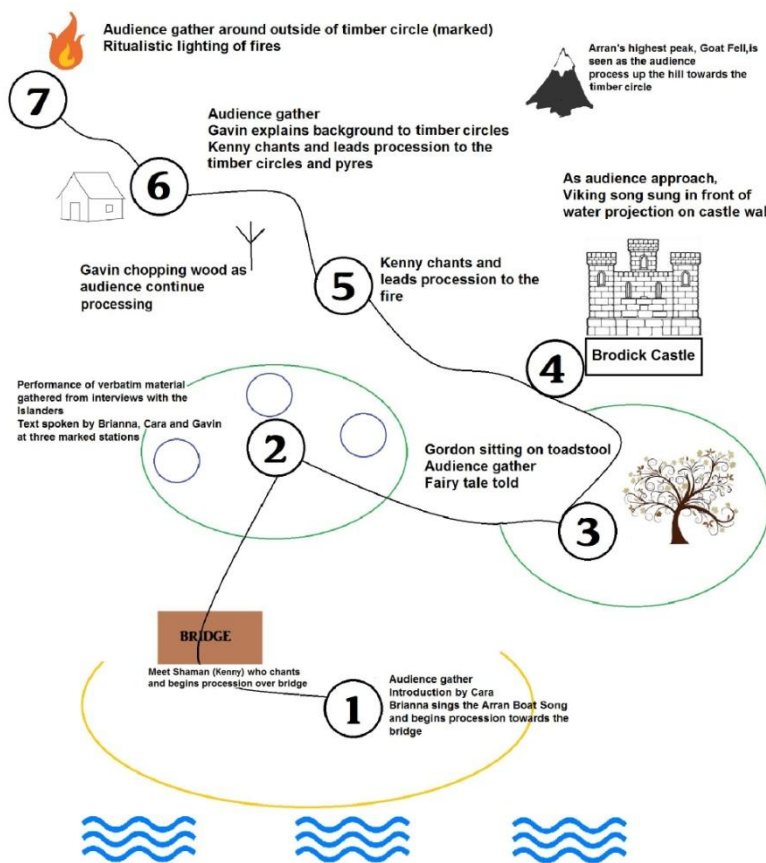
### **Burning the Circle: starting points, contexts and performance**

*Burning the Circle 2014* took place over 27–28 September on the Isle of Arran, in and around the National Trust heritage site Brodick Castle. Bringing together performance-based public engagement and ‘soft’ experimental archaeology<sup>3</sup>, the overarching goal was to playfully engage visitors with the island’s (pre)historic past, particularly its timber circles which have been linked by Brophy and Millican (2015) to the specific experience of and intervention into the landscapes of lowland Scotland by Neolithic communities. These landscapes would likely have been dominated by forests, which leads the authors to propose that trees would not have had a mere functional role in these communities but that they would have also provided a material basis upon which an ontology of ‘meaning, beliefs and values’ could grow (2015, p.314). Timber circles were then ‘built, not just from the trees in the forest, but their meaning as well’ (*ibid.*). Though the exact nature of their meaning is lost, there is ample evidence to suggest that many circles were burnt at some stage in their lifecycle—an act that is presumed to have had a ritual, rather than merely practical function, due to the effort involved in such burnings.

Brophy, MacGregor and Goeckeritz explain in their 2015 article on *BtC* that these events might ‘offer a visceral sense of what Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonies may have been like’ (n.p.) and are keen to frame them as a new educational tool. The *BtC* event we participated in was not an authentic reconstruction and re-staging: although the timber structure was based upon an excavated site on the

island at Machrie Moor and its construction was underpinned by design, it was nonetheless removed from its original location (see Brophy, 2016, pp.133–135). If the lived practices and value systems attached to timber circles are lost, performative reconstructions, no matter how well-informed by archaeological findings, are impossible.

Neither re-enactment nor historically informed performance (HIP), the performative elements of *BtC* nonetheless sought to produce an engagement with (pre)historical life by attempting to open up the spectators' imaginative capacity to speculate on the past. To do so we decided to expand the scope of the timeframe considered, taking spectators on a journey from the island's present to the increasingly distant and elusive past. At the same time, the performance resisted realist tendencies and narrativisation, instead presenting spectators with a 'density of intensive moments' (Lehmann, 2006, p.83) common to postdramatic theatre modes, by which we mean, following Lehmann, a specifically postdramatic approach to curating stage images in which 'space, bodies, gestures, movements, postures, timbre, volume, tempo and the pitch of voices are torn from their familiar spatio-temporal continuum and [are] newly connected' creating 'a complex whole of associative spaces' (Lehmann, 2006, p.110).



Map of the walking performance, indicating the different settings of the performance elements.

As demonstrated by the map above, the performance took spectators from a stretch of beach below Brodick Castle via the castle estate up a hill and to a field behind it, where the reconstructed timber circle had been erected. In doing so, spectators went on a passage from the sea to the sky, from dusk to nightfall and from the present to the past. Along the way they encountered various fragments of the island's past and present, including a performance of 'Queen Mary's Escape', also known as the 'Arran Boat Song', a folk song associated with the island; verbatim speech of islanders' experiences of the landscape presented by live performers; an interpretation of a fairy tale that originated on the island in a patch of wood decorated with lights and coloured yarn; a performance of 'Drømte Mig en Drøm', a Viking song, in front of Brodick Castle which was illuminated by a video projection of seawater; and, finally, the burning of the timber circle. The walk was led by a silent 'shaman',

performed by Brophy, dressed in partial costume. Reflecting on this performance, we will discuss and theorise the methods we used to explore how performance—when conceived as an affective structuring of an experience, rather than a mere creative packaging of information—can play a leading role in an interdisciplinary public engagement context.

### **From realist to postdramatic dramaturgies in heritage performance**

Performance, an art of simulation, feigning, non-authenticity, seems squarely at odds with archaeology, a discipline that pursues ‘truth’ by means of ‘authentic’ remains. Instead of placing the two fields in opposition, however, our performance made use of the overlap between them: in archaeology, as in performance, an interpretative step is needed in order to make sense of the multitude of heterogeneous materials. Post-processual archaeologists, such as Michael Shanks, insist that we cannot assume that we have access to ‘any metaphysical category of the past “in-itself” as origin of meaning’, there is no ‘raw past’ that we can encounter without mediation (1992, p.45). Instead:

The archaeologist participates in the meaning the object has. Understanding involves mediating the meaning of the past with one’s own situation. Gadamer calls this a ‘fusion of horizons’. So the prejudice of the archaeologist’s social and personal situation is not a barrier but the medium of understanding the past (*ibid.*).

If, as Shanks suggests here, archaeological understanding can only appear in a fusion of horizons mediated through the present, we might start to see an affinity with performance. The particular temporality of performance, which is simultaneously of the present and ‘punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other



times' as Rebecca Schneider writes, structurally resembles the archaeologist's situation (2011, p.92). Moreover, archaeology, like performance, relies—as Shanks and theatre-maker Mike Pearson's famous collaboration has already suggested<sup>4</sup>—on dramaturgy, on assembling data and sensoria in meaningful ways. What we were interested in exploring is how performance, as a particular medium—one that is always in and of time—might be able to produce what Schneider calls a 'temporal leak' (2011, p.10). In other words, we wanted to experiment with methods through which performance in the present might put us (tentatively, precariously, partially) in contact with the past. This meant asking: what kind of dramaturgy might suit this intention? How can the formal rendering of the event produce a critical understanding and engagement with (pre)historical heritage?

Typically, though by no means exclusively, performances that engage with the material cultures of the past in heritage settings invest in authenticity and realist dramaturgy. Paul Johnson, for example, notes that postdramatic forms have largely been ignored in heritage performances (2012, p.54)<sup>5</sup>. Following Hans-Thies Lehmann, postdramatic theatre does away with the 'dramatic paradigm' (2006, p.31), that is, a focus on the narration of a fable through interpersonal dialogue. Johnson offers a series of binary terms to shed light on some of the tensions in heritage performance which also go some way in explaining the hesitation to adopt postdramatic forms. Two of these are particularly important in thinking about our project: fiction / history—which pertains to the danger that 'careful consideration of competing sources can disappear, replaced with the particular certainty of performance' (Johnson, 2012, p.59)—and risk / safety—which he identifies as a tension between the often-critiqued tendency to present a safe, 'unitary interpretation' of heritage on the one hand and performance as a 'potentially unpredictable or unruly activity' that pluralises and destabilises meaning on the other (2012,



p.55). This latter point might explain the hesitancy to adopt alternative performance modes in heritage contexts: many postdramatic and live art practices revel in polysemy and indirectness. If the goal is to tame meaning in order to project a particular reading or interpretation of the past, then these forms might push back against any such attempt.

An analogous situation is evident in the HIP practice, a movement prevalent in music performance, which typically concentrates its efforts on the use of period instruments while research into historically informed singing practices have been neglected. Whereas instruments provide physical evidence of past music activities and a tangible connection to the historic past, historical singing practices are much more elusive, only accessible through partial documentation such as notation, training practices and descriptions of the quality of individual voices, which were frequently subject to public expectation and changing popular fashions. Although research can assist a singer in negotiating decisions regarding ornamentation and to some extent lyrical expression, timbre and style are intertwined with individual practices. HIP frequently debates performance (particularly in early music) in a way that attempts to capture a better understanding of the past through the use of historical sources that inform performance decisions. Therefore, it might have been useful to consider a HIP approach when collecting, curating and interpreting archival materials. However, it frequently struggles to provide a clear methodological approach to interpreting incommunicable elements of performance. While, as Helen Thomas suggests ‘the words “performed on original instruments” came to all but stand as a marker for ensuring that a performance was “authentic”’ (2003, p.126) during the popularity of the early music movement of the 1970s and 80s, the voice has not attained such a status. Our use of unaccompanied vocal practices in the performance contrasts with the emphasis on ‘hard data’ associated with authentic instruments. The ephemerality of the voice, the

impossibility of pinning it down and capturing it fully through notation or description, resonates with the ‘unruliness’ of performance practices at large that we wanted to exploit.

A troubling and troubled relationship with authenticity and unitary interpretations of past cultural practices, then came to be a central concern in our development of the performance. In reflecting on our work, we would like to suggest that this uncertainty of interpretation, so typical for spectatorship in postdramatic performance practices, may be precisely what makes it attractive for performances dealing with prehistory since it can produce a mode of watching that is analogous to archaeological work. To unfold this idea, we will look at two strategies we used in the performance: unaccompanied vocal performance—exemplified here through an exegesis of two voice-led moments—and an attention to affect as a means for encouraging interpretative participation. Overall, we suggest that our performance departs from the pseudo-realist dramaturgical form often associated with heritage performance. By instead making use of the possibilities of postdramatic forms which in their ‘fragmentary and partial character... [renounce] unity and synthesis’ (Lehmann, p.57), we were able to create a complex encounter with the intertwining of the present and the past, of presence and absence which was fundamental for both archaeological and performance research while being aimed at a non-specialist public.

### **Unaccompanied vocal performance: a tangible to an elusive history**

The performance began at the water’s edge, with the audience looking out to the horizon. A short introduction was read by Berger encouraging the audience to engage with the surrounding environment: the sand, the sea and

the dominating peak of Goat Fell, visible at the beginning stage of the walk, which would appear once again once as we reached our journey's end. This was followed by a performance of the song 'Queen Mary's Escape' by Robertson-Kirkland, during which she led the audience in a procession inland, away from the coast and up the hill towards Brodick Castle, juxtaposing the lyrical references of escaping the confines of an island-built historical castle across the water to the mainland. Since the legendary escape of Queen Mary is intertwined with Scottish history, the lyrical references alongside the physical space illustrated a journey through time, without specific verbal cues. Both the song and the story of 'Queen Mary's Escape' represent a documented history, in which a physical source can be examined and analysed but is also part of an oral tradition where the account is retold and passed from person to person, musician to musician; interpreted and changed by each new voice. The song is part of Scotland's present but is also strongly connected to the past, and as such it was included in the performance to represent the complexities of Scotland's cultural relationship with notated and oral forms of transmission.

A HIP methodology was employed insofar as 'a wealth of historical materials were consulted [...] to create a performance that was vivid, energised, interesting, and compelling for a modern audience', as pointed out by HIP researcher Martha Elliot (2006, p.3). The tune chosen for the performance 'Queen Mary's Escape' is known as the 'Arran Boat Song' and is prominent in traditional music circles by a variety of names including the 'Highland Boat Song', the 'Aran Boat Song' as well as 'Queen Mary's Escape from Loch Leven'. We expected our audience to primarily be the island residents and one of the aims of the project was to encourage our public to feel connected to the work through finding songs that are directly linked to the island's history<sup>6</sup>.

However, the relationship of the song to the island appears more one of tradition than historical fact. The first time this tune appears under the name the 'Arran Boat Song' is in *Kerr's Merry Melodies* published in 1875, yet the melody was in use as early as the eighteenth century (Kerr, 1875). It appears in the *Scot's Musical Museum* set to the text 'The Banks of the Devon' by Robert Burns and it was stated by the early nineteenth-century periodical *The Celtic Monthly: A Magazine for Highlanders*, that Burns married the popular Highland melody to his own text (Burns et al., 1787, p.165; Mackay, 1895, p.159). At this point, the melody which Burns collected was associated with the Highlands and it is unclear how it was linked in later years with the Isle of Arran.

Misspellings in the name complicated the origins of the melody further as noted by one of the contributors in the traditional music forum [mudcat.org](http://mudcat.org), who stated in November 1999:

The confusion comes with so many recordings with the tune of the Scottish Ballad (Queen Mary's Escape) spelling it 'The Aran Boat' (as Irish). I now think it must be a case of people leaving out the 'r' and not realizing they are switching the location from Scotland to Ireland (1999).

The conversation within this forum was adamant that the origins were Scots and not from the Irish island of Aran. The close resemblance of Burns's melody to current popularly played version of the 'Arran Boat Song' would suggest that at least from the eighteenth century onwards, the melody has been closely linked with Scotland.

With so many forms of the song in existence, a choice had to be made as to the version that would be performed during *BtC*. Though the text to Burns's 'The Banks of the Devon' references an idyllic pastoral countryside, that could

represent the landscape of Arran, there are too many references to specific place names to effectively argue for its use within this context. The same could be said of 'Queen Mary's Escape', the version of the song that was chosen for this performance. However, the lyrics performed on the night did not specifically reference Loch Leven, and still maintained the evocative legend of Mary's escape across treacherous waters.

While a HIP approach was employed in the examination of archival materials to assist the decision making regarding melody and text, the use of historical instruments, which may have justified the historical nature of the materials performed, was quickly ruled out. The unaccompanied voice was chosen as the primary medium for performing all the songs in *BtC*, as it represents a closer link with prehistory. Music archaeologist Iain Morley points out that 'musical capabilities are likely to have pre-dated the occurrences of instruments in the archaeological record by many years' (2013, p.32). The use of unaccompanied voice is more closely connected with the prehistorical past, where the small amount of materials that exist can only be interpreted through a perceived understanding of use. The physical artefact (in this case, music notation) may provide some clues as to musical pitch and rhythm, but the embodiment, expression and timbre of the sound produced is subject to interpretation, largely determined by the past experiences of the performer.

Robertson-Kirkland's singing voice has been greatly influenced by training in the Western classical style and as such has a recognisably cultivated sound. However, the pedagogy which her practice is a product of also has a complex oral / notated tradition<sup>7</sup>. Similar to the interpretation of archaeological remains, vocal heritage and culture is influenced by the experiences of the individual—what is known about the past has been contaminated by the

experience of individuals and the culture which surrounds them. Any attempt at an authentic performance is an unachievable goal since many of the performative aspects of song cannot be and have not been notated, and moreover each individual will have a different bodily sound. The unaccompanied voice then highlights the singer's individual interpretation, the physical training regimes needed to produce sound, as well as the ephemerality of singing practices. Its use gestures towards the uncertainty of the past and differs from realist styles of heritage performance, which may include 'authentic' instruments as a way of projecting a stable, knowable approach to these practices.

This concern became increasingly pronounced as the performance moved further back in time towards ever more elusive historical periods. While it may have seemed more appropriate to perform an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century song such as 'Queen Mary's Escape' in one of the island's main tourist attractions such as Brodick Castle, we wished to address the many temporal layers of Arran's cultural history within the performance. Though the inside of Brodick Castle is decorated in an early- to mid-nineteenth-century style typical of a heritage estate, its name reveals a much more diverse cultural past. The word Brodick is from the Old Norse *Breiðvík* meaning Broad Bay and it is known that Vikings resided on the island as early as the twelfth century (Campbell, 2013, p.122). Performing the Danish song, 'Drømte Mig en Drøm', one of the earliest secular songs dated from that period in front of the main tower house, specifically engaged with a history of the castle that is less discussed, particularly as there are limited written sources from that period on the island. It should be noted that it was not the internal decor of the castle that provided the appropriate historical 'dressing' for the song. Rather, the outside castle wall combined with the name of the castle and the song provided the historical context. The performance relied upon the audience's own archaeological



ability to connect the various etymological strands to fully understand the moment.

The song, which can be translated as 'I dreamed a dream', is a Danish ballad originally written in runic notation and old Danish. It can be found on the last page of text in the *Codex Runicus*, a law book dating from around 1300 AD. The song in this format is only a fragment and there are multiple interpretations that span written history. It offered a connection to the history of Arran but also bridged history and prehistory. The lyrics have been debated, with some scholars suggesting that it is a romantic ballad and others interpreting it to be a song discussing equality in keeping with the rest of the book in which it was found (Wright, 2015, p.2). In our interpretation, it represented a tangible transition from a (partially) documented past to an even more elusive past, as well as a physical transition: the song was performed in front of Brodick Castle as the sun dipped below the horizon and was the final stop before the walk to the burning pyres.

### **Public engagement as interpretative participation**

As these two performed moments demonstrate, the different stations of the walk did not aim to recreate historical events, rather they gathered together manifold traces of the island's past and contemporary cultural practices, layering them, to create a kind of dense temporal palimpsest. This, together with the dramaturgical arc of the performance that took the audience from the present into the past, resulted from a desire to avoid 'tidying up [the past]' by 'reducing it to a cause and effect logic' (Johnson, 2012, p.63). The spectators were presented with fragments of the island's near and distant past and called upon to make sense of the different pieces. They were led between these fragments by Brophy, dressed in shaman-like garb, remaining ceremonially silent and with little to frame the segments that would have made the connections between



them obvious. In this way *BtC* differed from more familiar forms of heritage performances that focus on dramatic (and often comic) narration of past events. The initial confusion of the spectators, who were perhaps expecting a more traditional style of performance, was palpable but soon turned into a contemplative attitude as they were led between the different moments. What we intended to effect was a mode of watching wherein spectators were asked to speculate on the significance of the different fragments, to interpret the remains they encountered and to come to terms with the uncertainty of any understanding arrived at; wrestling in other words with the challenges of both archaeology and performance.

The performance's dramaturgy reflected the untidiness and anxiety of engaging with remains of the past by drawing attention to fragments and only partial appearances, prompting us to face the fact that in dealing with the past we need to maintain an awareness of gaps, absences, and non-knowledge. Simultaneously, such a dramaturgical form may stimulate in the spectator what Lehmann calls 'synaesthesia' that is typical of postdramatic theatres: a state wherein 'the human sensory apparatus' that 'does not easily tolerate disconnectedness' goes 'wild', becoming hyperactive in its 'search for traces' to make sense of the fragments (2006, p.84). Crucially, synaesthetic watching does not close the gaps or synthesise the fragments but is 'accompanied by a helpless focussing on perception of the things offered' (ibid.). Such a fragmentary dramaturgy confronts the spectator with our compulsion towards the act of interpretation while at the same time foreclosing the possibility of an exhaustive and absolute interpretation of the past (as any connections made will inevitably remain subjective, temporary and contingent). It emulates the methods of post-processual archaeology which hinge on *interpretative participation* in knowledge-making.

We would like to suggest that the dramaturgical frame employed in the performative walk primed spectators for engaging with the elements of soft experimental archaeology in such creative and critical ways. A central underpinning of this strategy is the notion that materials used in cultural practices are not passive vehicles that are inscribed with meaning by humans but that, as Nicole Boivin suggests, material culture is 'able to alter human thought and understanding by relating it directly to experience of the material world, the environment, the body, and the emotions' (2015, p.283). From this point of view, objects and materials we engage with are co-creators of our understanding of the world. Equipped with some basic information about the cosmology surrounding prehistoric landscapes through a short talk delivered by MacGregor at the foot of the hill, spectators were invited to engage sensorially with the materials of Neolithic timber monuments and to use their own experience of the materials to speculate on how they might have contributed to particular ways of experiencing the world.

The final section of *BtC* involved setting alight the reconstructed Neolithic timber circle built by our collaborators on a field above Brodick estate at the foot of Arran's highest peak, Goat Fell, overlooking Brodick Bay. The site, situated between water and sky, captured the landscape's most prominent features. In the last vestiges of dusk, spectators followed the shaman-like figure drumming a simple beat and chanting up the hill. Arriving in near-total darkness they watched as helpers lit the timber poles as well as pyres filled with various materials<sup>8</sup>. As the fire illuminated the landscape its material force and particular affective qualities came to the fore. The material encounter with the fire was intended to stimulate questions about the past practices being re-created in the audience. These might have included: since flames obscure sight, create illusions of movements and shapes as much as they illuminate and cut through the dark—what kind of view of the world, of what is

real and what is not, does a culture so intimately familiar with fire produce? How did fire's dual nature, as both life-giving and life-consuming, feature in Neolithic cosmology? What kind of formations, ways of moving around a site, do timber circles inspire and what configurations of a community might they speak to?



*Pictured are Brophy dressed as the Shaman alongside images of the different materials being burned as part of the 'soft' experimental archaeology. Brophy started out his performance wearing only a few costume items, adding on further items at each station until the costume was completed in time for the burning. (Photography by Gavin MacGregor)*

By letting spectators experience a potential configuration of elements that are known to have been used in Neolithic ritual practices—circular structures, timber, fire—we intended to trial an experiential rather than primarily cognitive approach to engaging audiences with prehistory. The spectators were asked to adopt an archaeological mode of thinking through our use of a postdramatic dramaturgical framing of the event as a whole.



*Spectators watching the burning circle. (Photograph by Cara Berger)*

It must be acknowledged that our contemporary, twenty-first-century understanding of the materials—darkness, fire, wood, etc.—cannot be simply eclipsed or transcended. Importantly, animating the material fragments in performance allowed us to gesture towards the complex temporal modes involved in both archaeological research and in performance. Adrian Heathfield describes very precisely the strangeness of the time of performance, he writes: ‘the event is too full and seems too quick for you to know or contain it, which makes you feel like you were never fully there’ (2000, p.84). Performance then does not

allow us to arrive at the present moment, it confronts us with a constant sense of lagging behind, of not quite being able to grasp what is happening before us, of missing something. This temporal dissonance ultimately points towards one of the core difficulties that confronts archaeologists, namely that while archaeologists may be able to retrieve objects and things from the past: '[Archaeological evidence] exist[s] in the present, yet the world in which [these things] had meaning is gone. We give them meaning through an activity which is productive and interpretive. We produce the past in the present' (Pearson and Thomas, 1994, p.144). Performance might then expose how archaeological remains (whether authentic or reconstructed as in our case) and our experience of them are always mediated through manifold temporal layers, deferring any access to an original meaning. In doing so, performance might highlight the interpretative work that goes into constructing the past.

In this way, our approach differed from traditional re-enactments which are often 'neutered' of affects (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.117). Divorced from their temporal-cultural context, reconstructions of cultural activities such as pyre burnings lack investment by participants since there are no real stakes. We might contend that the re-enactment turns rituals or similar cultural activities, which mean to effect something (marking of the passage of time, tiding over a spirit, etc.), into affirmatives in Lehmann's words: non-actions, 'somehow nonperformative in the proximity of performance' (2006, p.179). Rather than viewing this quality of non-doing and inauthenticity as a problem, we wanted to investigate the potential of imitation, copying, doubling. Contextualised through the preceding walking performance that resisted realist forms, instead engaging overtly in mediation and artifice, the pyre burning became less about a faithful reconstruction that would inevitably fail due to a lack of participant investment. Instead, it asked spectators to engage with the materials and

actions as remains and fragments that cannot tell the whole story but might project some of their force, significance, or affective charge into the present, allowing spectators to speculate via their contemporary experience about the past significance of these materials in a 'fusion of horizons'.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *BtC* drew on the specific potentials of performance—both musical and theatrical—to engage non-specialist audiences with Arran's archaeological heritage and, perhaps more importantly, our ways of interpreting the remains of that heritage. Throughout the project, we were attentive to the particular epistemic possibilities of performance. That is, we were interested in how performance might inflect and trouble dominant ways of knowing by insisting on the ephemerality of cultural activities, upsetting any sense of definitive 'knowability' of the past, while also highlighting its ability to encounter the remains of the past in the present.

Such an approach conceives of performance as a way of thinking. It relies upon performance activities producing formally specific insights, their being as a medium and the modes of sensorial engagement they produce. To us this seems like a productive way of approaching the role of artist researchers in interdisciplinary public engagement activities, since it creates the conditions under which disciplinary knowledges and methods can meet and modify each other: in *BtC* spectators were encouraged not only to develop an understanding of the island's archaeology but to also engage with such 'performance thinking'.

However, our approach sits at odds with advice given by national bodies such as the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) who emphasise data collection via traditional methods such as feedback



questionnaires as a measure of success (n.d.). Live performance does not necessarily have clear quantitative or qualitative goals that can be formally obtained through traditional methods, though performance can have a lasting impact that changes the audience's mode of thinking. If researchers want to design and deliver enjoyable, striking and—most importantly—effective public engagement activities, it is vital that we seek to understand what spectators make of our offers and for this reason we believe that more creative modes for capturing this are needed. This is especially the case for projects that, like ours, invest in the ability of creative practice to affect, provoke and stimulate spectators in unpredictable and open-ended ways. The next step for us then, planned as part of the next iteration of *Burning the Circle* in 2017, is to devise methods for capturing spectators' experiences and theorising these in relation to our aims and aspirations.

## Notes

1. In using this term we find RCUK's list that public engagement might encompass: 'generat[ing] public awareness', 'communicat[ing] research outcomes' and 'disseminat[ing] knowledge' (n.d., p.1) particularly useful.

2. This event was building on an existing collaboration between Brophy, MacGregor and Goeckeritz who had already staged the first *BtC* in 2013 in the same location. Baxter, Berger and Robertson-Kirkland joined after taking part in a public humanities workshop run by Brophy and MacGregor and as such, the location and time scale for the 2014 event were already fixed.

3. Experimental archaeology tests the viability of hypotheses developed from material remains by replicating behaviours of prehistoric communities. Here, the attempt was to record data on the kind of remains created by burning pyres to compare them to actual remains found elsewhere. As the parameters of the experiment were informal and ad hoc, Brophy and MacGregor suggest describing this as a 'soft' method as opposed to 'hard' science (Brophy and MacGregor, 2014).

4. In the 1990s theatre-maker and performance scholar Mike Pearson entered a sustained period of collaborative work with classicist Michael Shanks and archaeologist Julian Thomas. Much of the thinking and creative practice that emerged from this period is laid out in Pearson and Shanks's book *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). A central tenet of this work is that the two disciplines overlap in their



'functioning as modes of cultural production, involving the recontextualisation of material rather than its reconstruction' (p.xi). We build on this finding here, specifically rethinking it in light of the public engagement turn.

5. There are of course notable exceptions to this. See, for example: Smith (2013) as well as the works of NVA reviewed by Brophy (2006) and Berger (2016). However, to our best knowledge postdramatic forms in public engagement contexts specifically have not yet been discussed.

6. The NCCPE encourage researchers to 'think about "communities of place", targeting people by where they live, or "communities of interest", where it is people's interests, passions or other shared circumstances which help to focus the engagement' (NCCPE, n.d.). This was also our approach here.

7. Robert Toft and John Potter both discuss the complexities of the history of vocal pedagogy (Toft, 2013; Potter, 2012).

8. The burning of clay pots, a chicken carcass and other materials were a feature of the soft experimental archaeology undertaken by Brophy and MacGregor.

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